

Cruising The Upper And Lower Florida Keys

Exploring Key Largo, Islamorada and Marathon

Jan
27
2015

by Kristen Manieri, and
photos by John Norman.

Tweet 2

Like 5

Book a flight

WESTJET

Plan a vacation

vacances
WESTJET
vacations



The Florida Keys deliver a laundry list of tropical pleasures perfect for leisurely exploring, mile by mile. It's a road tripper's paradise, with just one main thoroughfare—the Florida Keys Overseas Highway (U.S. 1)—to take you all the way to Key West where Mile Marker 0 sits just a three-and-a-half-hour drive from Miami International Airport.

But resist the urge to rush your trip; this 100-mile-plus chain of islands holds delightful diversions worthy of a multi-day jaunt.

Key Largo and Islamorada, in the Upper Keys

A flurry of motels, fast-food joints and bait and tackle shops are left in the rearview mirror as U.S. 1 begins to bend toward Key Largo and Islamorada, the Keys' first major stopping points. The mangrove views are lackluster at first, but then, at around Mile Marker 110, *boom*, Florida Bay leaps into view. Home to a state park and [The Crocodile Lake National Wildlife Refuge](#), the Upper Keys offer some of the best scuba diving and snorkelling experiences in the country, while Islamorada is considered to be the sport fishing capital of the world.

Play

Key Largo's [John Pennekamp Coral Reef State Park](#) is the first undersea park in the United States. Visitors can explore the park—part of the Florida Keys National Marine Sanctuary—either by kayak, glass-bottom boat tour or via a scuba or snorkel trip.

For those wishing to reel in a trophy fish, a slew of sport-fishing outfitters abound. Full-day charters depart each morning, with half-day charters setting off twice daily, and they return with their bounty ready to turn over to any number of nearby restaurants willing to cook the day's catch.

Heading onward to Mile Marker 77.5, be sure to make a quick pit stop at [Robbie's Marina](#) in Islamorada, a kitschy spot where brave visitors hand-feed the gargantuan tarpon that congregate around the docks. There is a one-dollar entrance fee to the dock and for three dollars, visitors can purchase a bucket of dead fish and, with a hand stretched out over the water, drop the stinky treat into the toothy and eager mouths below. The entrance fee is refunded if you decide to stay for a bite to eat at the Hungry Tarpon restaurant. In the cooler months, you might even spot a pelican or two.

Stay

[Guy Harvey Outpost Islander Resort](#) offers homey digs with the addition of its new bayside townhomes overlooking Florida Bay. These fully equipped, two-storey cottages feature private balconies, perfect for taking in the sunset.

Eat

Kick off your shoes and dig your toes into the sand at [Morada Bay Beach Café and Bar](#), an Islamorada gem perched on a palm-lined beach. Besides a sea-focused menu and fun tropical cocktails, the casual haunt features a monthly full-moon party where reggae bands and DJs transform the beach into an unforgettable starlit fete.

Marathon and the Lower Keys



Marathon, also known as the Middle Keys, comprises around 14 miles of linked islands including Vaca Key, Fat Deer Key, Boot Key and Grassy Key. This family-friendly stretch of waterfront restaurants and beachside inns is home to the Seven Mile Bridge, one of the longest segmental bridges in the world and the host of the annual 7 Mile Bridge Run for more than 30 years.

Play

Animal enthusiasts will love the behind-the-scenes, guided educational tours offered at [The Turtle Hospital](#) (Mile Marker 48.5) in Marathon. Here, not only do you get an in-depth peek into the plight of Florida's sea turtles, you can also meet some of the rescued turtles and leave with the satisfaction of knowing your admission dollars support this non-profit in its efforts to save, rehabilitate and release the turtles. Reservations for tours are highly recommended.

For something a little more low key, head to [Bahia Honda State Park](#) located in the Lower Keys. Home to one of the most beautiful beaches in the United States, it's a stellar stop to while away a few sun-drenched hours. The park is located at Mile Marker 37 and stretches across almost 500 acres of protected land. While you're there, take a snorkelling trip to the U-shaped Looe Key Reef—part of the National Marine Sanctuary—where you'll see a stunning variety of tropical fish, rays and colourful coral.

Stay

A coastal retreat with more than 400 resort rooms and villas combined, the newly renovated [Hawks Cay Resort](#) in Duck Key is a destination all to its own. Besides a selection of swimming pools speckled across 60 acres, the main draw is the saltwater lagoon where families can enjoy a placid ocean dip without the worry of waves.

Eat

Set on a dock overlooking the water, the [Keys Fisheries Market and Marina](#) in Marathon serves up fresh seafood via a walk-up window. This ultra-casual eatery is no-frills with its picnic-table seating, but dishes like the legendary Lobster Reuben and peel-and-eat Key West shrimp by the pound are top-notch.

Getting There: [WestJet flies to Miami](#) eight times a week from Toronto.

<http://www.westjetmagazine.com/story/article/cruising-upper-and-lower-florida-keys>